

He Must Increase – Part I
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John 3:22-30
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Please turn with me in your Bibles to the third chapter of John. We're going to be looking at a new section of this glorious Gospel this morning. John 3:22, and following, this morning. This section, 22-36, comprises a whole new focus and teaching topic that we want to begin to look at this morning. One of the applications that we want to draw from this passage is to answer the question, and I want to pose the question: How do you recognize a spiritually vital and healthy ministry? And what marks truly, faithful, Gospel ministry? How do you know if a church is on the right track? How do you know if a minister, or a Bible teacher, a Sunday school teacher, an elder, a deacon, a disciple, a counselor, is on the right track? Is their moving and teaching true to God's standard? The applications that I mentioned are broader than just a church, it definitely applies there, and it applies to those who are called to the preaching and teaching of the Word, but it also applies to Bible study teachers, to biblical counselors, to really all of us because we ought to be about making disciples. We are all ministers, and so all of us need to have faithful, Gospel ministries. So this passage provides for us some sort of litmus tests to examine, so that we might recognize true, faithful, Gospel ministry.

So the title of the message this morning is, 'The Character of True Gospel Ministry'. This morning we'll read the entire passage, John 3:22-36, though we're going to focus on just the first nine verses this morning.

John 3:22-36:

22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people were coming and were being baptized—24 for John had not yet been thrown into prison.

25 Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew about purification. 26 And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him." 27 John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am



not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.' 29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full. 30 He must increase, but I must decrease.

31 "He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. 32 What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. 33 He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. 34 For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. 36 He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

Let's pray together.

Father, we bow before You and Your Word. We're thankful, Lord, that You have given us Your Son and also Your Spirit without measure through Your Son. We pray that the Holy Spirit might even now open our minds and our hearts, that we might see what You want us to see this morning. But most of all, that we might see Jesus. We pray this in His Name, amen.

How do you recognize a spiritually vital and healthy ministry? What marks truly faithful preaching or teaching? That's really what comes out of this passage as we look at it. Now what I want to do to introduce it though is to do some good observation and to look at the W's and an H as we often do. The *Who? What? When? Why? Where?* and *How?* But this is really just introduction, and then we're going to look at these marks, or characteristics, of faithful, Gospel ministry. But let's get it in context by doing some good observation.

1) Who?:

The *Who?* of the passage. Well, we see in the passage that you have this presentation of Jesus and His disciples, alongside John and his disciples. John really becomes the focus at first. Verse 22, ... *Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He was spending time with them and baptizing. 23 John also was baptizing...* along with his disciples. So the *Who?* is Jesus and John. The apostle John, remember, is not John the Baptist. The author of the book is another John, John the apostle. He is calling as it were, John

the Baptist, as a witness. Actually, recalling him. He's already given us his testimony a number of times in this book as we're going to see. He recalls him to the stand as it were, to say, "What does John the Baptist say about Jesus?" Because remember the whole purpose of this book is stated in John 20:31:

John 20:30-31 ~ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

We talked about how in a sense he's presenting evidence before the reader to say, "Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of God, so believe!" If you think about that, as you read through the Gospel of John, I encourage you to read through it as often as you can. Look at how John is calling witnesses. He lets you hear what John the Baptist says over, and over, and over again here in the first three chapters. Remember when we were in Chapter 1 we got to hear what Andrew said to Peter? "We found the Christ." You hear Andrew's words, "Peter, we found the Christ." Then you have Philip talking to Nathaniel. "We found the one of whom Moses, in the law, and also the prophets wrote. We found Him, Jesus of Nazareth." Nathaniel says, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? You've got to be kidding. The Messiah can't be from Nazareth." He says, "Come and see," and then Nathaniel comes and Jesus then speaks knowing what's in Nathaniel's heart so that Nathaniel himself we have saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of God. I believe that You are who they said You are." You hear testimony, after testimony, after testimony throughout the book. You're going to see that with the Samaritan woman and the Samaritans because John wants us to hear again, and again, and again, just who Jesus is so that we will be convinced that He is the Christ, and we'll give ourselves to Him. So that's the big picture of what's going on here. So he's recalling John to the stand as it were, by telling us these events that are only recorded here of all the four Gospels. In fact, we come to the *When?* of this. We looked at *Who?* John, Jesus, their disciples.

2) When?:

When does this happen? Well we're told in Verse 24, John had not yet been thrown into prison. This is before John's imprisonment. What's interesting is when you compare the other Gospels, each of the other Gospels basically, you know when you're reading narrative, we talk about this when we study on Wednesday nights. We studied through Genesis. One of the things you do when you're reading the Bible, and God's is telling stories, He's telling us what really happened, but

He's recounting details of what happened. He's leaving some out. One of the questions you ask is: "Why did He leave something out? Why did He put this here? Why did he not say something about that?" You ask those questions of the text. The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, basically when you look at the ministry of John the Baptist, you will see that you have John the Baptist come on the scene preaching in all three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You have the recounting of Jesus' baptism, John baptizing Jesus. Then you have Jesus going into the wilderness to be tempted. Immediately after the baptism He goes into the wilderness to be tempted, and the next thing you have in Matthew, Mark, and Luke is John's imprisonment. You don't have any details between the baptism and the imprisonment about John the Baptist. But in John's Gospel, he gives us a window into that period of time which was Jesus' first Judean ministry. The other Gospels basically jump right on ahead to His Galilean ministry, the ministry up in the northern part of Israel. They start there. But John, writing last, in God's providence, probably about 80 or 85 A.D., at least 20 years after Luke wrote, and more like 35 or 40 after Matthew and Mark. He's aware of those other Gospels and he's filling in some details, and showing us some things that we need to understand. He tells us this story about this rivalry that happens on the part of John's disciples. Not on the part of John, but on the part of John's disciples. Because as we see, the *What?* really. We said, *Who? What? When?* right? Before He's baptized.

3) Where?:

The land of Judea. Jesus goes into the land of Judea, the countryside. He's left Jerusalem where He had His encounter with Nicodemus after He was there for the Passover. Now He's making His way northward and He's in the land of Judea, the Judean countryside, and they begin to have a period of extended time of baptizing. Jesus is preaching and they're baptizing. We're told that also, now we're coming to the *What?* Well, actually we're still on the *Where?* These W's get kind of complicated don't they? The other *Where?* We're told John, in Verse 23, is baptizing in Aenon, near Salim which we're not really exactly sure where that is except that it's not right beside where Jesus is. Probably John is a little farther north. He's not in eyeshot of Jesus and so that leads to the conflict.

4) What?:

Because what happens, and the *What?* now, is we see they're both baptizing. The word baptize is very important in the first few verses, although it's not the dominant theme, it just sets the stage. Look at Verse 22:

John 3:22 ~ ...He was spending time with them and baptizing.

That is Jesus. John was also baptizing. There was much water there. Many people were coming to him and were being baptized. Then in the report of the disciples of John, speaking of Jesus in Verse 26:

John 3:26 ~ ...behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.”

So they are both baptizing. Their ministries are overlapping, this ministry of preaching and baptizing. Apparently, though they're not beside each other, the way they found out about Jesus' baptism ministry is from a Jew who may have been baptized by Jesus and His disciples. He was walking back down through the Judean countryside, or somewhere out toward where Aenon and Salim are, and he sees John again. He's like, "Hey, why are you guys still doing this?" This is kind of reading between the lines, but I think a reasonable inference. "Hey, you guys know that Jesus is baptizing. His disciples are baptizing. The crowds are flocking to Him. Why are you all still doing it? I think this baptism is now more purifying than your baptism." This may be what's going on, although the text really says that the dispute happens on the part of John's disciples. In fact, the way the Greek reads, the NAS translates it well.

John 3:25 ~ Therefore there arose a discussion on the part of John's disciples with a Jew...

The idea is the conflict, it's a discussion, it's a debate, bordering on an argument. It arose out of John's disciples. This Jew didn't start it basically. He may have brought some information, asked a question, but they really start debating and being upset about this. The picture is that they get so upset about it that they just have to run and talk to John. "We've got bad news! Do you understand what's happening, John?" You can see kind of the spirit of anxiety, and frustration, and competition that is driving them because they speak of Him as Rabbi, and they never mention the name of Jesus. Do you see that? Verse 26:

John 3: 26 ~ "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him."

"Something is wrong with this picture," they're saying. "John, look at the ministry that you had." John had a tremendous ministry for an extended period of time, probably a couple of years. He's baptizing and preaching. Josephus speaks about

the impact of his ministry. It was a lasting impact. In fact, throughout the Mediterranean world the Jews had a great opinion of John throughout the 1st Century. Many who rejected Christ still had a high view of John. It's hard to believe, but true.

So John the Baptist's disciples are all upset. It's kind of like, "Look, our church is diminishing and that guy over there, He's taking everybody away. What are you going to do about it?" I mean, John had had this tremendously effective ministry, this immense popularity. They're saying, "Your place, your prominence, your stature is diminishing, John. We need a new program. Can you come up with something? That baptism thing was great. It's worn out now. Let's go to something else." That's modern evangelicalism, isn't it? One fad after another.

5) How?:

And the question *How?* How will John respond to this? As the reader first looking at this, not knowing what's going to happen, not fully understanding who Jesus is, reading this the first time, we said that it's addressed, we believe, to Jewish unbelievers and Jewish recent converts, basically proselytes to Judaism who need to be convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, but who speak Greek. John's Gospel was targeted primarily at Jews because it deals with Jewish themes, even like this major emphasis on John the Baptist. He gets a lot more attention here. I know in Luke he gets a lot of attention in a different way. Remember the story of his birth was told in Luke, but Luke doesn't have much of his preaching ministry, much of what he said. Here John the apostle gives us great detail on what John said because he wants the Jewish audience he's writing to hear what John the Baptist said about Jesus. So the question is: How will John respond? How is he going to respond to this diminished popularity, his prominence, his ministry passing, ebbing beyond its climax? It's on the downward slide. Well in his response, which we have, from Verses 27-36, we really have a prototypical paradigm for true, Gospel ministry. In the way he responds, we have the way every true preacher of the Gospel ought to respond, and ought to aspire to. And every Christian ought to try to live what John exhibits in the way he responds to these questions, this dilemma.

How do you deal with your diminishing popularity? John's answer is simply to say, "This was exactly what I was called to." He doesn't say it in these words, but I can imagine in his heart he must be thinking, "You guys have been with me for years and you've totally missed the point. I've been saying, 'I am not the Christ.' I have been sent to prepare the way. My message has been, 'Look behind me. Look behind me, after me comes One who is before me. After me is One coming whose

thong of His sandal I'm not worthy to untie. He is the One who has existed before me. He is the One who will baptize. I baptize with water. He'll baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire!" It was like, "Have you guys not been listening? How many times have you heard me say that, and you missed it!" In the way he deals with his diminishing place, and his removal of prominence, his removal of stature is absolutely exactly what ought to be the heart of every true, blood-bought Christian summed up in the words, "He must increase. I must decrease." That's the essence of true Christianity. It's all about Jesus.

So the character of true, Gospel ministry, we're going to see it's really here in Verses 27-30, in John's response. We're going to look at the first four verses of his response today for four characteristics of true, Gospel ministry. Next week we're going to look at the content of true, Gospel ministry, Verses 31-36. The four characteristics of true, Gospel ministry.

I was talking to someone this week who is being transferred and was talking about how you find a church. It's interesting, God's timing. I was working on the sermon but I hadn't gotten that far along, you know? It's always, the process of expository preaching is you don't know what you're going to preach on until you study the text, and then you know this is what the Bible is saying. You don't go with an idea, "I want to preach on how to recognize true, Gospel ministry. Let me see if I can find a passage." No, you let the Lord direct the agenda. It's so freeing. It's hard work, but it's freeing. No burden, it's just, "This is what the Lord has to say," and I'm amazed continually how timely God's Word is. He is sovereignly ordaining the timing and all the things that are going on in our lives. We know it, but we just don't know it, do we?

Anyway, how do you recognize true, Gospel ministry? Four characteristics. The *context* of true, Gospel ministry is the first point. The context. We're going to look at the center, the second point. Thirdly, the aim. And fourthly, the proof. Basically each verse has a point.

1) The Context of True Gospel Ministry:

First, Verse 27. "Hey, John, don't you see the problem? Everybody is going to Him." In fact, you see their envy and their competitiveness in their overstatement. "All are coming to Him." What the verse had just told us before, look in Verse 23:

John 3:23 ~ and people were coming and were being baptized—

There are still many people coming to John, but from John's disciples' viewpoint, "Everybody is going over there." It's tragedy because they're looking at the things of man, through the eyes of man. They've missed the point. What you see is the context of true, Gospel ministry is not competitiveness, but contentment. Not competitiveness, but contentment. Competitiveness has no place in the ministry of Jesus Christ. It has no place in the Church of Jesus Christ. This means that it doesn't matter that another church is growing larger than our church, or another church is having more success, or another person's Bible study in the church is having more success than your Bible study, or another person's counseling ministry is having more success apparently than yours. It doesn't matter! If you're really thinking rightly. The way you can avoid competitiveness, and you can have contentment, is to know what John knows. Competitiveness is rooted in our sin and our desire to be great, of course. The anecdote is to see God as great. The bigger God becomes to you, the smaller you become. The bigger you become, the smaller God becomes. It's an inverse relationship. What John is saying here is, "Look, guys let me just tell you something right off the bat, before I get to the fact that you've missed the whole point of my preaching ministry. Let me just tell you something, a maxim you need to understand, a man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from Heaven. Why are the crowds going to Him? Because God is sovereign."

So submit it to the sovereignty of God and stop striving. In fact, the language is emphatic. I like the way the ESV translates it. It says, "A person cannot receive even one thing unless..." it's really a double negative in the Greek. It says literally, "A man is not able to receive nothing except it be given Him from Heaven." The double negative doesn't cross out, it's for emphasis. "A man cannot receive even one thing." He's presenting a maxim, a truth for all of life that applies in every area. We get in so much trouble because we're always looking at what somebody else has and wanting that. That's covetousness and that is wickedness. When you understand truly that God has given everything, I mean everything that you and I have is from Him. Our problem comes when we start wanting what somebody else has rather than thanking God for what we have. "I wish I was more gifted like that person." "I wish I was in a better field of my particular ministry like that person." What are you saying? "God you made a mistake. I want you to see that I would be a lot better over there than he would," or, "Don't you see that she would be better here. She needs to not have that position. I need to have that position." But the Lord is doing it all. He is the One who puts every person where they are to be born. He put you with your parents. If they are unbelievers and mistreated you, God sovereignly put you there. You can fight against, kick against the goads, or you can accept it, and praise Him that even the things that your parents may have done that

were wrong and sinful, God meant for your good. They meant it for evil possibly, God meant it for good. Certainly Satan means everything for evil. He's always trying to steal, kill, and destroy, but God is sovereignly meaning everything that happens to those who will come to Him for good. All things work together for good! Not most of them, all of them. So rejoice in the sovereignty of God and be freed up to be content. We ought to be saying continually, "How good God is to me." Not just saying it, lip service, but really meaning it.

It's one of the blessings I've received in talking to Charlie Winsell. I don't think Charlie is here today. He was hoping he'd be here today. He's had his chemo this week, and he's now off for a few weeks. They're going to do some tests next week to see how it's going. But talking with Charlie the other day, "How'd the chemo go today?" I talked to him on Friday and he said, "Well, it's good to be done with it," and he was getting ready to go downstairs and work on his wood work. I said, "Well that's great you feel like that." He said, "The Lord has been good to me. The Lord has been so good to me." It's just a matter of how you look at it, isn't it? You can look and see what God hasn't done for you, or you can look, if you put it in context, He has been so good to every one of us. We deserve hell, eternal hell with no chance for repentance. God does not owe you an opportunity to repent. He does not owe that to you. He owes you hell! He owes me hell, forever, because I am a rebel from my mother's womb! What mercy to let me breathe a breath. What kindness to let me hear the Gospel. What incredible love to cause me to be granted ears to hear, and eyes to see. Every moment of every day is a gift. So whatever station you have, at any particular time in your life, is God's choice for you. It frees you when you stop worrying about where you're not, and what's not happened to you, and you just rejoice in where you are and what opportunity you have. It frees you to be effective and fruitful.

John had had immense popularity. People were coming out but he was preaching the Word firmly and boldly. What's going to happen to him now? The crowds are going to diminish and he's going to get arrested. Just like it says in Verse 24, before he was thrown into prison. The other Gospels tell us what happens is when he goes to prison, imprisoned by Herod, he's faithful to God. He has a lot smaller audience. He starts preaching to Herod. "It's unlawful for you to have your brother's wife. You're a sinner and you need to repent and to get ready for the Messiah." Herod chops his head off. But he was faithful. It wasn't about how big a crowd it was, it was about where God put him, being faithful where you're planted.

People that have made the biggest difference for eternity we'll never know until we get to Heaven. The difference that you and I have made in our lives, I think we'll



be surprised when we get to Heaven to realize that certain things that we never thought were that significant were tremendously impactful for the Kingdom. We had no idea. Be faithful where you're planted.

So the context of true, Gospel ministry is contentment, not competition. When pastors want to leave and take the next step up to another church, that's an awful thing. It's a symptom of what's wrong in the church. You hear statistics, you know the average pastor is done in less than 18 months. I can't believe that. How could you possibly leave in that short of time? Now sometimes, in fairness, sometimes the congregation is sending them out, right? That's where the average comes from too, but you can't even get to know anybody in that period of time. I am so thankful that I had Dr. Douglas Kelly, the guy that rolled his tie that I talk about sometimes. The Scottish/North Carolina mountain man, brilliant theologian. In one of the days where he got to preaching and rolling his tie he said to us, "When you get to a church, don't even think about leaving. Don't even think about leaving until you've been there 7 years." He said, "In fact, you're not even getting warmed up until you've been in there 7 years." He said, "In my experience this isn't in Scripture clearly except that you see the benefits of faithful, continued, persevering ministry." But he said, "It's been my experience as I've talked to ministers throughout my life, that seven years, there's something magical about that time when you've been there long enough to earn credibility. You've pounded the Word of God. You've pounded the Word of God. You've tried the best you can to live consistent to it, but you've pounded the Word of God, and finally it begins to break through." If it takes seven years and you're leaving in 18 months, I mean, good grief, that's crazy. The Lord can certainly lead somebody away. If somebody leaves at 18 months, there's no way we can stand in judgment of that ultimately, right? But it should be a rare thing that the Lord would do that, not the common thing.

So it's not about competitiveness, it's about contentment trusting in the sovereignty of God. That's the context of true, Gospel ministry that John exhibits. He's content with whatever lot the Lord in His mastery gives him. Be faithful where you're planted. That's the first characteristic of true, Gospel ministry.

2) The Center of True Gospel Ministry:

The second is the center of true, Gospel ministry, or we might say the center of true, Gospel preaching. Verse 28:

John 3:28 ~ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'

“I am not the Christ. It is not about me,” John says. “I’ve just been sent ahead of Him. It’s about Him. I’ve been saying this continually. You are my witnesses.” They had even said in Verse 26, “The One about whom you have testified.” The key word in the Gospel of John. The word in Verse 26: ***...to whom you have testified,...*** Verse 28: ***You yourselves are my witnesses...*** The same Greek word, (μαρτυρέω) martyreō. The word martyr comes from that. It means *to witness, to testify to something that you have seen, you know to be true.* John, the apostle, uses it 45 times in the Gospel of John, various forms of that word. I mentioned earlier, he’s bringing testimony. Remember? In fact, turn back over to John 1 just to see how important this word is. Look at John 1:6:

John 1:6 ~ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John.

Here John the apostle, in his opening statement as it were, thinking of that legal jargon again, legal terminology, he’s going to prove to you that Jesus is the Christ. His opening statement is Verses 1-18, the prologue. Then he says:

John 1:6-8 ~ There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.

“Listen to his testimony,” John the apostle is saying about John the Baptist. Look at Verse 15. John the Baptist, again:

John 1:15 ~ John *testified about Him and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’”

Look at Verse 19:

John 1:19 ~ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”

Now look at what his testimony was. Remember? We looked at this several months back.

John 1:20-21 ~ And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” 21 They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” And he *said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.”

When we looked at that a few months back we said there is a threefold denial, three times John says, “I am not the Christ.” He’s saying, “Don’t look at me. Don’t look at me. Don’t look at me.” The center of Gospel preaching is, the center of true, Gospel ministry is a self-effacing, a self-dismissing, a removal of the self so that Christ can be the center. So the center of Gospel preaching is Christ, not us.

We read earlier in Paul’s statement about his ministry.

2 Corinthians 4:5 ~ For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake.

“We preach Christ, not ourselves. Don’t look at us, look at Him.” It continues on in Chapter 1, they ask him in Verse 25:

John 1:25-27 ~ They asked him, and said to him, “Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” 26 John answered them saying, “I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. 27 It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

Verse 29:

John 1:29-31 ~ The next day he *saw Jesus coming to him and *said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He on behalf of whom I said, ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’ 31 I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water.”

“How did you recognize Him, John?”

John 1:32-34 ~ John testified saying, “I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. 33 I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’ 34 I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

Do you hear John ringing testimony? “It’s Jesus! It’s Jesus! It’s not me. It’s Jesus! Look at Him!” Such clear testimony and yet his disciples, “Hey, we’ve got a problem, they’re going to Jesus.” John said, “It’s not us. It’s not me. It’s Him!” The center of Gospel preaching is not the preacher. The center of Gospel ministry is not the Bible teacher. The center of Gospel ministry is not the Christian counselor. The center of Gospel ministry is Jesus Christ! He’s our message. It’s such a simple thing and yet it’s so often forgotten. I forget it. Evangelicalism has forgotten this almost completely, I mean, the ‘How To’ sermons. How to have a better marriage. Here are seven steps. How to be a better dad. How to overcome anxiety. All of those things are important but that’s not the focus of preaching. It’s part of it, but that’s not the focus of preaching. It’s a part of it, yeah, applying the truth of who Jesus Christ is to your marriage will make you a better dad, will make you a better husband. It’ll help you overcome anxiety when you see who Jesus is, but the message is just who Jesus is and just what He’s done. That’s the message. It’s not seven steps and then kind of a tack on at the end as an afterthought. Let me just ask you if you want to pray this prayer. When you hear a sermon like that, no, that is not Gospel ministry. I’ve got to give my obligatory reference to Jesus at the end before I’m done. No, the focus is always Christ.

Now listen, when we exposit the Word, when we take a passage of Scripture from the Old Testament, it’s easy in John to find Jesus, isn’t it? He’s the focus, it’s the Gospel. But when you look back when we were looking at Daniel, we’re talking about the life circumstances of the people of Israel around 530 B.C., having just come back from Babylonian captivity. These things are about them understanding their need to trust God and to be faithful to Him in difficult times. But even there, what we tried to see was how every passage leads you to Christ, and the reality is every passage does. Jesus said in John 5:32, “You search the Scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life, but these are they that testify of Me. The whole Bible testifies of Me,” He says. Every passage of Scripture addresses, listen to me carefully, every passage of Scripture rightly understood addresses some aspect of the fallen human condition. Every passage addresses some need that you and I have because we are racked with sin and unbelief. Every passage addresses some level of lack of trust, and the answer that it poses is Jesus Christ.

Daniel, pick a passage there. Being faithful in difficult times, we see the world falling down around us. How can we trust? Well you’ve got to see Christ. You have to understand that He’s with you in the difficult times. So you exposit the Scripture but it’s always with a view toward leading the person to Christ. In counseling, the same thing. Your problem is you’re overwhelmed with anxiety or fear. You can’t overcome your anger or your lust, your greed, your covetousness.

You can't overcome these things. How do you come to overcome them? To see that the answer is Jesus. He is the Prince of Peace who speaks peace and calms the storm. If you really understand His authority, you cannot be afraid. You cannot be anxious. Now the problem is that we don't. The problem is we're sheep. The problem is that you tell me today and I forget tomorrow. I need to be reminded tomorrow that He's the Prince of Peace. The problem is we want wealth, we want the things of this world. What we need to understand is that all treasure is found in Christ. Everything that I need is in Him. Every sense of worth and love, every sense of value as a man or as a woman, is found in Christ. It's leading the person away from their idols in biblical counseling to find their sufficiency in Christ. So if our ministry is not leading people to Jesus, we're messing up. Listen to this, it's so easy to forget this. I confess that in my counseling, in my ministry, too often I get focused on the problems and fixing, right thinking, which is important, right? I forget, "Wait a minute, the objective is to get you to Jesus." In fact, that brings us to the third point. The context, contentment, not competitiveness. The center, Christ, not the self.

3) The Aim of True Gospel Ministry:

It is pictured in a beautiful way in John 3:29.

John 3:29 ~ He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.

That is a beautiful picture. John says, "Look, I'm a friend of the bridegroom, why would I be upset that the bride is going to the bridegroom? Are you guys crazy?" True, Gospel ministry is about taking people to the bridegroom. It's about pointing them to Jesus, not ourselves. This is why we have to watch out as ministers, as Christians who are ministering to one another, we can enjoy the acclaim and affirmation of people. We feel like we have the answers. "Thank you so much. You've meant so much to me." There's nothing wrong with some appropriate appreciation like that expressed, but we need to make sure when we hear that, "It's not me, it's Jesus." You don't want to get confused. I don't want to eclipse Him. "Follow me as I follow Christ, but don't focus on me. Look over my shoulder at Him. Keep your eyes on Him. He is the One." The aim of Gospel ministry is that a person comes to encounter Christ. The aim of every sermon, of every Bible study, of every counseling involvement, every time you and I talk to one another just in casual conversation and start talking about spiritual things, the aim ought to be to

help one another to come to see Christ. That's really what Colossians 3:16 is talking about.

Colossians 3:16 ~ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you...

This is one of those places where again I think we need a new translation of the Bible. This is tongue-in-cheek, of course. The Southerner's Translation of the Bible, because that is a you plural. That is a *ya'll*. Let the Word of Christ dwell in *ya'll* richly. Because we tend to think so individualistically. "I need to let the Word of Christ dwell in me. I need to meditate." Well, of course you do, but that's not what that passage is saying. That's Psalm 1. That's not Colossians 3:16. Colossians 3:16 is saying, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in *ya'll* richly." How? Admonishing one another, encouraging one another. Do you see? Speaking the truth to one another. That's how the Word of Christ dwells in you richly. It's the Word of Christ, that's not a technical term for the words *The Bible*. That means to talk about Jesus. Just be talking about Jesus to each other. Let that fill you. Let that dwell among each other. He's saying, "Learn to keep pointing one another to Christ." Like I said earlier, I need you to remind me tomorrow what I forgot yesterday. The reality is that you need me to do the same for you.

Isn't it amazing how we can't see what we need to know? I can see what you need. Man, it's clear. Your problem is just absolutely clear to me. My problem, I have no idea what to do. You're like, "How can that be? It's the same problem I have. I just need you to tell me." That's letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. So that the aim of Gospel ministry is not anything less than a personal encounter with the Living God. Listen to John Stott in his marvelous book *Between Two Worlds*, on expository preaching. John Stott is a wonderful man of God from England who died just a couple of weeks ago. You may have seen something about that. He was in his early 90's. He wrote this book a number of years ago. He said:

The main objective of preaching is to expound Scripture so faithfully and relevantly that Jesus Christ is perceived in all His adequacy to meet every human need.

The true preacher is a witness, he is incessantly testifying to Christ. But the preacher's purpose is more than to unveil Christ, it is so to unveil Him that people are drawn to come to Him and to receive Him, not just in salvation, continuing to receive Him. Do you see that? Continuing to come to Him. Continuing to fall down before Him. The picture that John is getting at in John 3:29 is exactly that. He's using the image of a Judean wedding. The best man, the friend of the

bridegroom. His responsibility was to protect the name and honor of the bride and the bridegroom, to kind of help out, making sure everything goes well with the ceremony and stuff, and the festivities. You know, one of his duties was to make sure that there were no inappropriate contacts between the bride and the bridegroom before the wedding, and then his job was to walk with the bride and the bridegroom. Listen to this, his job was to walk with the bride and the bridegroom to the marital chamber, the bridal chamber, the honeymoon room, to stand outside the door, to guard it, so that nobody else would go in. Back then, it wasn't like today, everybody had their own bedroom. We forget this. We have so much space in America, we don't know that houses were smaller. "This house is dedicated to a new couple. Don't come in." He stands outside the door to guard it, and also to be there to verify that the bride has come to her husband in purity. He hears the voice of the bridegroom celebrating the wonder of now being joined to his wife, and loving his wife, and that's his joy. All the months of betrothal have come to an end and this man has found this woman, and their joy is now my joy. John says, "That's the joy of ministry. Your joy is not in people listening to you and enjoying them listening to you. Your joy is in pointing them to Jesus and hearing the shout of Jesus in His joy in finding them give themselves to Him." That's it. Our joy is the joy of a friend, the best man. It's not our party, it's not our wedding, it's all about Him. If we do anything other than that, we're just getting in the way. It's about Jesus, and the best thing that you and I can do is to get out of the way. It's that personal encounter with Christ, that's the goal.

Stott also writes:

Another way of putting this same truth (Talking about we're to unveil Him so the people are drawn to Him.) is to say that preaching is in the nature of personal encounter, or at least its purpose is to facilitate an encounter. The great encounter however, is not between the preacher and the people, it is between God and the people.

Donald Miller puts it even more strongly. He writes:

No man has really preached until the two-sided encounter between him and the congregation has given way to a three-sided encounter where God Himself becomes one of the living parties to it.

That's preaching. You see how that is not saying, "Here's seven steps, and let me tell you in a clever way, and give you a couple of poems, and some memorable stuff to say, and now go live it." That's not Gospel ministry, and that's not how we

should see anything that we do in our lives. It should always be about Jesus. Even our parenting, our instruction to our children, helping them get past just this, “Don’t do that or Daddy is going to spank you,” to, “Do you understand son why you’re always doing that?” Or, “Young lady, why you are always doing that? You struggle because you’re a sinner just like me. You don’t learn, just like me. You need a Savior. Praise God, we have a wonderful Savior.” Everything is about Christ. So the aim of Christian ministry is to see people give themselves more completely to Jesus.

4) The Proof of True Gospel Ministry:

Now finally, the proof. We’ve said the context, contentment. The center, Christ, not the self. The aim is a personal encounter with Christ where the person surrenders more fully to Jesus. They see that He really is the answer to their problem. Now the proof. Verse 30:

John 3:30 ~ He must increase, but I must decrease.

John, when he sees the crowds moving from him to Jesus, that’s the test, and he says, “That’s exactly as it ought to be.” He rejoices in the joy of the bridegroom, and he says, ***He must increase, but I must decrease.*** He’s going to go down. His popularity is going to decrease. As I said, he’s going to become less and less well-known, less and less listened to. Finally, he’s going to die. He doesn’t continue riding the crest until he goes home.

It’s interesting when you look at church history, that’s often the case. I think we just naturally think in America it’s always getting bigger and better, right? We’re always getting the new and improved Tide, right? It’s always newer and improved. It’s always bigger and better. That’s not the way you see it in church history though. It’s not the way you see it so often in ministry in general. I mean, people like Whitfield and Wesley had incredible times of blessing when God was working in their lives, where they had crowds coming to see them, and then later they had little, small churches because what does a man have that’s not given to him? Be faithful where you’re planted no matter where it is. Realize that in general, the Lord has this tendency because He knows, and He wants, the Father wants all the attention on Jesus.

Remember what He said when Peter at the Mount of Transfiguration said, remember that Jesus is unveiled before Peter, James, and John? His glory is unveiled and they see the glory of Christ shining out. They also see Moses and

Elijah standing beside them, and Peter says he's scared to death because he knows they've seen God. They shouldn't have seen this. He's like, "It's good for us to be here." "Don't kill us," in other words. "And to show you of my good faith, let's make three tabernacles. One for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Then a voice out of Heaven says, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him." Do you get the force of that? "Let me make one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus." The Father says, "Forget Moses! Forget Elijah! This is My Son! Listen to Him! He's the One!" It's Jesus, it's nobody else. It's Jesus! He's our hope. So don't look at the other people." That's what John is saying. "Don't look at me!" Throughout church history it's been that way. The great people we always tend to be like John's disciples, we glamorize the man. We forget the flaws and there's certainly a grace to forgetting the flaws, right? Love covers a multitude of sins, but never forget that there's nobody, *nobody*, NOBODY like Jesus.

One of the most astonishing things to me when I read this for the first time a few years back, Jonathon Edwards. Many of us have received pejorative views of Edwards from high school. Remember he's the guy that preached that, this is high school now, that awful sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. That's how they taught it to us. It was an incredible sermon, used in an incredible moment of history, by an incredibly, godly man. You read Jonathon Edwards and you find a man who loved Christ, who loved God, and who *loved*, who LOVED sinners, who was mightily used of God, who when people look back now, almost 250 years after his death, or actually over 250 years after his death, and they say, "The most brilliant man to ever write theology and sermons in the English language. The most skilled, skillful thinker about Christian truth and how it all relates." What I started to say was what is so amazing to me is when I read his biography and I found out that Jonathon Edwards got fired. About 10 years after the great awakening, 10 years after his tremendous sermon, 10 years after he's been leading. He was a stalwart, a brilliant man, and I'm like, "How?" I thought to myself when I first read that, "I want to get to Heaven and if there are any of those guys on that committee, I want to say, 'What were you thinking? You fired Jonathon Edwards!'"

When you look at it more carefully, you find that Edwards probably did a couple of things wrong, mishandled a couple of situations. I don't think he deserved to get fired. I think they were really stupid, but you know what he did? He went from there, a very influential church in North Hampton, Massachusetts, a place of great respect and authority, he went and he ministered to the Indians in Stockton, way out in the wilderness. He taught Indians and he had time to write. He wrote The Freedom of the Will, and he wrote some other books that he had time to write

because he wasn't as busy with pastoral ministry. He was teaching the basics again to people who didn't know anything. He was faithful wherever he was planted.

The reality is, I think God does stuff like that because He lets you and me because we need this. We forget that the person that's ministering to us, if it's a counselor who has been discipling you, if it's a pastor who has been ministering to you, or a Bible teacher who has been ministering to you, we forget that they are just as flawed, and weak, and of dust as we are. Just as apt to fail. Just as apt to sin. If we forget, the Lord has a way of knocking them down. Think about the picture again. Follow me as I follow Christ. That's the essence of ministry. I'm following Jesus, come along and follow me. There are times where because the people maybe are thinking too highly of us, the Lord puts our face in the dirt so they can see without any obstruction, Jesus Christ. Do you see? Remove him, so they can see Jesus! Because He's the One we follow. He's the only One worth following. The essence of true, Gospel ministry is the realization, "Lord, let me decrease so that He can increase in their hearts." Because that's the answer. They don't need me. We don't commend ourselves, we preach Christ. Isn't that a wonderful reality?

It's not about you and me and our failures. As parents we're going to fail. Our kids are going to have to learn. At some point in time, by God's grace, they're going to see us where we belong, on the ground. It's where they belong to, but when we're on the ground they can see Jesus. None of us is worthy of emulating ultimately, but He is, and He will always be, and He is faithful, and He will never fail them, and He will never fail you. So let us all, from the bottom of our hearts, say with John, ***He must increase, but I must decrease.*** God help us to do that. Let's pray.

Our Father, we praise and honor You. You are so kind, so good to find a way to save sinners and to remain holy. To give us the treasure of all treasures, the knowledge of God in the face of Christ, to see in flesh and blood, the glory of the invisible God. We thank You for Jesus. Lord Jesus we worship and honor You, and we ask that You might have the preeminence in all of our hearts. We pray that we would gladly get out of the way. We pray that we would not look to other people, only look to them so that we can look over their shoulders and see Christ. May He be our all in all. Father we pray for those who are here today who have not given themselves to You, who because they're deceived, they're blinded, do not trust that Jesus is everything they need. Lord we pray that today You would break the rebellion, open their blind eyes, unstop their deaf ears, and let them see the glory of the Son of God. Let them run to Him now and surrender their lives to Him forever. Lord there's no greater joy than being one with You, and we pray that You would help us grow in that joy every day, that we would not forget that what I need



today is more of Christ. That what I need tomorrow is going to be more of Christ. That what I need throughout all eternity is more of Christ. Lord bring that to pass in all of our hearts. We pray this in Jesus' Name, amen.

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